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ABSTRACT

Little research has been directed at the psychological development of poor women. So as to better understand this group, the results of a qualitative study of 20 white, semi-rural women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (welfare) are reported in this paper. All of the women were completing a two-year college degree. Their process of psychosocial transformation is the focus of this research. Each participant was invited to tell her story as a woman, as a student, and as a welfare mother. Results show that nearly all the participants depicted themselves as objects subjected to the power and control of men and social institutions. Their narratives spoke of devaluation and subordination, evidenced by sexual and physical abuse, male violence, and institutional contempt. A clear correspondence between the control and devaluation the participants experienced and their expressed fears, self-blame, and feelings of worthlessness, stupidity, and incompetence emerged. Most of the women described three critical turning points in their self-transformation: motherhood, betrayal by mates, and higher education, all of which challenged their existing definitions of self. Their stories describe a process of self reconstruction amidst the constraints of male power and control. (RJM)

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Welfare Women Who Pursue Higher Education: A Quest for Self

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Constructing Selves in Transition: Women Crossing Economic and Geographic Borders
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Welfare Women Who Pursue Higher Education: A Quest for Self

Dr. Jacquie Scarbrough

I will describe very briefly the results of a qualitative study of 20 white, semi-rural women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (better known as welfare) who were completing a two year college degree at a community college.[1] The purpose of the study was to identify their process of psychosocial transformation. Today I will illustrate a few ways these resourceful women rewrote themselves

Little research in women's psychological development has been with poor women (Reid, 1993). Welfare as a way of living and thinking about the world can affect a woman's sense of self just as does gender and class. Welfare recipients, situated in a stigmatized, economically stressful, and dependent position, struggle with devaluation and powerlessness. And higher education can affect a poor woman's meaning-making and often her political and social power as well. It is important then to shed some light on how women who are receiving welfare carve out agency amidst severe social constraints. Tapping their constructions of self adds vital knowledge both to psychological research and to policy formulation (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Scarbrough, 1992; Tierney, 1993; Gonsalves, Scarbrough, & Wolfson, 1994; Stewart, 1994).

As I could not locate any instrument that would measure the transformations I had witnessed in this group of women, I invited each participant to tell me her story as a woman, a student, and a welfare mother. I asked her to view her life as a book with chapters so I could focus on her interpretation of critical life events and transformations.

Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze across cases, I identified one over-arching theme of male control and dominance. In recollecting

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[1]This paper summarizes the results of a larger study, a dissertation titled, "Welfare Women Who Pursue Higher Education: Tales of Transformation," Boston College, May, 1997. Requests for copies of this paper or inquiries should be sent to Dr. Jacquie Scarbrough, Campion 309, Chestnut Hill, MA 02167 or jscarbro@capecod.net.

their past, nearly all the participants depicted themselves as objects subjected to the power and control of men and social institutions. They told narratives deformed by devaluation and subordination, evidenced by sexual and physical abuse, male violence, and institutional contempt.

Four-fifths of the participants contrasted this past self as victim or prisoner against a present self as protagonist. I typified this process as a change in self narrative from damsel in distress to a heroine quest. Here are excerpts from Barbara's early story as a victim:

> The abuse I went through with my brother started showing itself quite prominently in my choices later. I would look for someone who would not be sexually abusive, but abusive in one form or another because I felt I deserved it...When you live fourteen years with an alcoholic who was verbally abusive you begin to believe that you are worthless and I had reached that point.

Then she described the emergence of a new self:

> The old me would agree with anything anybody had to say just to avoid an argument- I would basically 'yes' somebody or something to death, even though inside it was painful sometimes. I still don't like arguments. I avoid fights and I'll compromise, but I won't compromise to the point of cutting myself short...I no longer put emphasis on other's people's feelings toward me. I've generated feelings for myself that are positive rather than negative. There's nothing worse than waking up and saying, "Oh God! What am I gonna do wrong today?" and when you live with an alcoholic, that's what you do...But I basically redefined myself and I like that person...My children are very important to me as I said, but I also found that I've shifted some of the importance of life back to myself...

And finally, she described her successful quest:

> I found then that I could make it on my own and that is a big, big, thing for me...Induction into Phi Beta Kappa was awesome. There's no other word for it. It made me feel my worth for the first time, in a long time.

There seemed to be a clear correspondence between the control and devaluation the participants experienced --in their early families or with their mates or on welfare-- and their expressed fears, self blame, and feelings of worthlessness, stupidity, and incompetence. As Barbara summarized, "If men have no respect for women, they do not respect themselves and they are very easily victimized. AFDC is the final nail in the coffin; you really think you are not worth anything."

Most participants described three critical turning points in their self-transformation- motherhood, betrayal by mates, and higher education- which acted as centration events challenging existing definitions of self.

For example, in describing motherhood, they often saw themselves as an agent, yet this authorization to act was severely limited because motherhood also meant relinquishing themselves. Jill described this paradox of power and selfless responsibility eloquently:

> Another important turning point in my life was when I had children because my sense of self totally changed. I didn't have my own sense of self as much any more because it was divided up among children, small children, needy children, you know, little children. So I was giving a lot of myself emotionally. It was a real emotional drain and physical drain too, but it was also a sense of powerfulness. Of like- look, what I did! I created these human beings and now I am responsible for them, but it was a good responsible, you know. I felt like I really had a purpose here now. I have to achieve now. I have to succeed. I cannot fail now. I may have failed all through my life, but this is a time when I can't fail anymore so that was a turning point for me too

For some women in the sample, motherhood was one of their first experiences of value and agency. But motherhood also acted as a double-edged sword since without a man, restricted by limited options, motherhood could leave you with only "bad" choices, poverty, and blame.

For all of the participants, betrayal by a mate, the second critical event, shattered the fairy tale narrative of meeting a prince and living happily ever after (Zipes, 1994). Desertion signified betrayal for some; for many, battering or emotional abuse by alcoholic or drug-addicted mates was interpreted as a defining event; and for all, betrayal by a mate meant economic destitution. Sally described her revelation of betrayal: "And he must have hit me one good time because it knocked a lot of sense into me."

With the help of counselors or supportive college reentry program staff, many women, like Sleeping Beauty, awakened at this time from the prison of past trauma. Sally continued:

> He followed me, he stalked me, he broke into the house, he tried to run me over, he tried to steal the baby, he took me to court at least once a week. But where could I go? So I went to counseling at (battered women's shelter)...I found out stuff that I knew, but didn't know- that my brother had incested me since I was six...Now I know everything. I've got the power. No one is gonna walk over me ever...That's when I, you know, broke free."

The participants discarded the limited fairy tale script of marriage and male breadwinner; Henrietta explained: "When they (her daughters) were babies and I had no way to support them-it was then that I realized that they had to be able to support themselves and any children they may have, that they couldn't rely on anyone else to do that, ever." They threw-off the dependence on

male authority. "I'd rather be dirt poor and happy than married miserable and well-off," quipped Noelle.

College offered an opportunity to reframe themselves as smart women who no longer needed a man to think for them. A disproportionate number of participants experienced academic success despite past school failure, learning disabilities, and a lengthy hiatus from school. College provided a context wherein these reentry women constructed an alternative story for themselves and their children, modeled on the traditional story form of the quest. Sylvan describes how she no longer sought rescue from without; instead she found the magic from within.

> I got in Phi Beta Kappa, the honor society. I graduated 3.89 and this was the best thing I'd ever done...but that gave me the confidence to go and do my job...I really feel so hopeful for the first time. That I can really do this and I'm worth something...I've proven myself over such a long period of time now that I really believe that, yeah, I'm capable of doing this stuff now...Yeah, to be real content with where I am. You know, not that I don't have goals, but I know enough about myself now that I'll always know that I can be reaching those goals ...Now, I know, you know, that I count .

And they became models for their children. Deborah said, "I can see that I've been a power of example to the children...I feel like I can give back to my girls. I never felt like I had enough to give before ." At graduation Noelle gloried:

> It's been neat seeing my son, Chad. He says, 'The more you know, the further you'll go, and the more dough.' Well, I brought him to the Evening of Excellence dinner. I received a thousand dollar scholarship. That child was absolutely astounded.

As part of their transformation, the participants construed welfare as a means to a goal rather than dependence. Valerie spoke on how being on AFDC was a destructive thing for her :

> I only turned it around because I had the support of (reentry program)...Now I use food stamps. I don't answer to anybody. I know where I'm going. I know I work at school. I know I volunteer for people, you know. I know I am an okay person. I don't need to justify anything.

This meant they renamed their selves as respected thinkers and hard workers rather than the public persona of a welfare mother as lazy, undeserving, and dependent. Jill became

> the President of the honor society... it's a public affirmation of your success... many people have pointed out to me, you are not the typical welfare profile. You know, you just don't look like whatever a welfare mother is supposed to look like... I would show up at

> the ceremonies for the honor society in a business suit, you know. And it's just like it's cognitive dissonance, you know, incongruous with what it's supposed to look like. So that was always kind of fun. That was an important turning point because it really proved to me that things aren't always as they seem.

And, for some women this rewriting of self facilitated by higher education became an irreversible social class border crossing; the opening of new intellectual vistas and jobs left old friends and values behind. Marie said:

> My motivation changed...I'd see people that I used to hang around with. They are still doing the same things. They have nothing going for them. It's like I want something better for myself. I want something better for my daughter. I don't have to depend on a man. I don't wanna be in a relationship to have someone take care of me. I want to be able to be on my own and make choices in a relationship because I want to be there.

In addition to academics, the participants also learned alternative models of relationships of mutual support and respect from their counselors, fellow students, and college staff. Loretta described the reentry staff and students as, "my lifeline in my first semester. They were like the mother in the nest and then they pushed me out and now I am flying on my own, but if things get tense, I go back."

Drawing on James Gee's work (1989, 19991a, 19991b, 1992; Riessman, 1993), in this study I also semantically analyzed two individual narratives of transformation which complemented the grounded theory analysis: these narratives described a movement from object to subject, progressing from images of being stuck or constricted, without a voice, unable to move- to images of doors opening, speaking with one's own voice, moving toward one's own goals. The two women described a process of moving from a less desirable mode of knowing to a more desirable mode, from traumatized repression to self knowledge and from restricted knowledge to college knowing.

This research describes a process of self reconstruction-- changing the mythological shape of life to a quest for self amidst the constraints of male power and control. Nearly all of the participants moved beyond living the narrative others wrote and the psychological defenses that

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kept them asleep to who they could be. They were no longer controlled but in control, no longer subordinate but their own authority. Jill described this newfound self.

> Women who understand that they are powerful are incredibly effective and it takes a long time to learn that you have that power. But once you learn that you have power, suddenly you move in a forward direction and things start falling into place because, not because of-maybe, I don't know- synchronicity... I think you also make it happen, you know, you start putting your life in order.

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